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SUBJECT: SECRETARY GENERAL SURIN ON BURMA, CHINA'S ROLE, AND U.S.
ABSENCE

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Secretary General Surin believes that China gains a heftier -- undeserved -- stature in ASEAN every time U.S. leaders are absent from an ASEAN Summit or high-level meeting, to our detriment. He notes the U.K. has decided to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation; it is not a legally binding document, and the United States should follow suit. He emphasizes the vital role of China in nudging Burma forward, and urges us to help press the Chinese to become more forceful. Surin wants us to look for ways to engage Burma non-politically; he feels a sanctions-only approach makes it impossible for ASEAN to make progress with the junta. He fears that without capacity building in health, education, and other social sectors, a post-junta Burma will quickly become a failed state. End Summary.

U.S.-ASEAN Summit: Symbols of Consequence

¶2. (SBU) During a meeting with Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, ASEAN's new Secretary General, on February 6, the Ambassador took note of the

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significance ASEAN places on having a U.S.-ASEAN Commemorative Summit. Surin responded, "Everyone here would like to see Bush too". He revealed that during last week's ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting in Singapore, Prime Minister Lee specifically mentioned that Secretary Rice had twice missed ASEAN Ministers Meetings (AMM). Lee

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had noted, however, that ASEAN hoped for a possible Summit with President Bush around the dates of the July G8 Summit in Japan or Beijing Summer Olympics.

¶3. (SBU) Dr. Surin emphasized that summits and attending ASEAN high-level meetings, although symbolic, have concrete political consequences. The U.S. has a real, substantive, engagement with ASEAN countries, he said, yet every time the U.S. is "distant and absent" China steps in with a symbolic gesture and reaps the accolades and political gains that a real partner like the U.S. truly deserves. Over time, Surin asserted, the U.S. is replaced, though Southeast Asia was America's to lose.

Everyone Loves Me (Even the Brits) But You

¶4. (SBU) Another example is when other countries with little engagement or investment in ASEAN -- like Russia -- sign up to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and gain tremendous

goodwill. The treaty is a political document, not a legally binding one, Surin continued; the United States only contributes to its slow displacement in the region by not signing on to the treaty. Surin revealed that the U.K. has decided to sign the treaty but is delaying the formal act due to sensitivities about the issue of Burma. After the U.K., he noted, the United States would be the only permanent member of the UNSC that has not signed.

You Most Likely Know It as Myanmar, But It Will Always Be Burma to Me

15. (SBU) The Ambassador emphasized how seriously we view the issue of Burma, and that we want to work constructively with ASEAN to move forward. Surin believes that the U.N. process is stalling and that the search for a solution will return to the ASEAN region. He vigorously emphasized the vital role of China in nudging "Myanmar" towards change. Surin believes that the U.S. should press China to be more forceful, and that China might oblige if persuaded of the global "PR" benefits -- ASEAN countries alone cannot convince China to take this course of action. For a regional intermediary, Surin suggested, a country like Brunei might be more effective and less intimidating than a vibrant, vocal democracy like Indonesia.

16. (SBU) Dr. Surin urged the United States to look for ways to engage and work with Burma in non-political areas. He suggested infectious diseases/healthcare, education, police training, public administration -- anything that might make the regime less stubborn and defensive (in the face of only sanctions) and more amenable to discussing change with ASEAN neighbors and other interlocutors. Who will build Burma's future leadership, Surin asked? He expressed the fear that without serious capacity building in these areas now, a post-junta Burmese government and state might simply collapse under the weight of its inadequacies.

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